

“Preface to *A Call to Arms*” and “A Madman’s Diary”
By Lu Xun

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July 2014

12th grade
World Literature or English 12
One 50-minute class period

Summary:

In the auto-biographical “Preface to *A Call to Arms*” Lu Xun describes why he began writing. He recalls a scene when his father was ill and Lu Xun was required to obtain the medicine for his recovery. Upon receiving the list of medicines, Lu Xun became angered and began to blame traditional medicinal methods for his father’s illness and eventually, death. He was inspired to enter the medical field.

The turning point of his career as a medical student occurred when he witnessed a film about the Russo-Japanese war. He watched many classmates blindly cheering on death. He was appalled by this blind show of loyalty and decided to switch the focus of his studies to literature. His goal was to “change their spirit.”

Lu Xun’s attempts to promote literacy and literary ideals were met with failure. At this discouragement, he began to copy writings for the sake of copying them, with no real intended purpose. A friend of his began to question his methods and enlightened Lu Xun into the reality of the power of writing. He was able to see writing and literature as a means of bringing about hope for the future of his nation.

“A Madman’s Diary” begins as an unknown narrator returns home. He hears that one of his childhood friends has been ill and decides to visit. Upon his arrival, the ill-friend’s brother claims that he has recovered and allows the narrator to read the diary of the recovered man to convey the depth of the illness.

From this point, the story is told from the first person point of view as the younger brother, or madman. As the diary entries continue, the madman’s paranoia becomes more evident. As he begins walking down the street, he suspects his neighbors of evil doing because of their ‘murderous’ glances. The paranoia eats away at the madman and he develops insomnia. In this period of insomnia, the madman attempts to learn why he feels as he does. He begins to read “Confucian Virtue and Morality” and discovers that many people are misinterpreting the traditional customs and values outlined by Confucius. This misunderstanding is leading men to eat other men.

The madman becomes more fearful of those around him, including his own brother and the doctor for whom his brother has sent. He questions the motives of those around him and eventually realizes he has been involved in this flesh-eating for quite some time. He resigns himself to his own fate, yet holds out hope that “there are still children who haven’t eaten men. Save the children...” (Chinese reader 71).

Historical Context:

Lu Xun is known as the “father of modern Chinese literature.” He was born Zhou Shuren in 1881. His family came from an educated background firm in Confucian values (Wagner 1). His account in “Preface to *A Call to Arms*” is autobiographical. As a child, he lived through the Sino-Japanese War and the Boxer Rebellion (Wagner 1). His life during this time was incredibly

structured and though he followed the norms set for him, he felt a sense of inner conflict and turmoil.

Living through the Sino-Japanese War, Shuren witnessed chaos in the form of young rulers. China was unprepared to cope with the influx of Western influence and demands of the time. At the beginning of the twentieth century, China was in the midst of revolution. China began to see political fragmentation and a rise in nationalism. In order to address the political fragmentation taking place in China, a national movement began called the May Fourth Movement. The movement radicalized the intellectuals and launched an attack on imperialism and Confucian beliefs.

Zhou Shuren adopted the pen name Lu Xun and became a critic of the Nationalists. He was able to use his writing as a means of reflecting his inner conflict toward Confucianism and Nationalism. His reasoning for going against cultural norms of China during his formative years is outlined in the “Preface to *A Call to Arms*” discussing the illness of his father and his desire to “change [the] spirit” (Chinese reader 66).

Lu Xun’s “A Madman’s Diary” was published in 1918. He was one of the first to write about people as fundamentally antagonistic in nature. He wrote of the dark moments within himself that translated to contradiction of the self and government ideals. He took on the task of shoulder the thoughts of a nation, at a time when modern literature was competing with traditional Chinese literature. “A Madman’s Diary” questions the loyalty of a nationalistic identity in conflict with one personal identity. Will you conform, or will you pursue your own identity?

Discussion Questions and Answers:

1. How is “A Madman’s Diary” a socio-political commentary on China at the time?

“A Madman’s Diary” reflects a society in which one man is singled out for not following the conforming to socio-political norms. The narrator, who refers to himself as a madman, acknowledges that he is different from those around him and assumes a title with a negative connotation. He must be a crazy man for not believing what everyone else believes. In “Preface to A Call to Arms” the narrator recognizes the problems with traditional methods in China. The story is a violent satire of the problems China is going to face if it does not move toward modernism. When Lu Xun describes his reading of the “Confucian Morality and Virtue” he comments: “I read intently half the night until I began to see words between the lines. The whole book was filled with the two words – ‘Eat people’” (Chinese Reader 68). This quote explains the narrator trying to find an answer to the problems that plague him by looking in a traditional Confucian text. The words become so muddled; he only begins to see the two words which confirm his suspicions of those around him. It is a commentary on over-analysis and/or oversimplification of tradition.

There is even discussion on page 70 of the Chinese reader, “I am afraid he has already taught his son; that is why even the children look at me so fiercely.” This implies that social

norms and beliefs must be passed down and inherited. Children are not born to follow a specific path; that choice is made for them as they age.

The madman's warning toward the end of the story suggests that those who do not change will be responsible for their own downfall. "If you don't change, you may all be eaten by each other. ... You must change at once, change from the bottom of your hearts! You must know that there'll be no place for man-eaters in the future..." (Chinese reader 71). If China does not change its traditional ways, it will be wiped out.

There is also the acknowledgement of those who do not agree with the flesh-eating, yet go along with the process anyway. "On the other hand, if a man is frightened or worried to death, though that makes him rather thin, they still nod in approval. I only eat dead flesh!" (Chinese reader 69). This shows that though people will go along with social norms despite their belief in them. There is a sense of justification that must be associated with the statements and conformity. "But I also know that they did not all think alike by any means. Some of them thought that since it had always been so, men should be eaten. Others knew they shouldn't eat men but still wanted to, and were afraid people might discover their secret..." (Chinese reader 71).

2. What is the connection between the "iron house" in the "Preface to A Call to Arms" and last diary entry?

In "Preface to A Call to Arms" there is a discussion between Lu Xun and his friend about the morality of waking people who are trapped in an iron house on the verge of destruction. Is it fair to wake those ignorant of their own suffering in order for them to become aware and suffer? Or is it better to allow the ignorant to die in peace?

The connection between the "iron-house" and the last line of the text is hope. In an attempt to wake the few ignorant, there is a chance those ignorant may be able to save themselves. Similarly, Lu Xun wants to "save the children" (Chinese reader 71) and provide hope for a future where people will not follow tradition blindly.

There is a commentary of the ignorant as innocent as well. People cannot be held accountable for their actions because they do not know any better.

3. Why are the narrator and brothers unnamed in "A Madman's Diary?"

The characters may be unnamed for several reasons:

One: As some elements of the story may be autobiographical, the characters may reflect people Lu Xun knew. As a safety precaution, he left the characters nameless.

Two: The lack of name, similar to the point of view, allows the readers to step into the story themselves. They may feel the same emotions as the unnamed narrators and find remnants of themselves within the characters.

Three: Yet another reason the narrator and brothers are not named is because they are irrelevant. There is more importance on the message, themes, and undertones carried throughout the story as opposed to the individual characters. Since the story is a social commentary on the masses in China at the time, focusing attention on an individual may defeat the purpose.

4. Why is the point of view important in “A Madman’s Diary?”

The point of view in “A Madman’s Diary” is important because it is not specific. This story can apply to anyone who acknowledges and accepts a different path in life. The point of view of the madman allows readers to feel the same paranoia and fear the narrator feels; thus placing them in the same mindset.

5. Though the story was written almost 1,000 years ago in China, how is the story a commentary on Western ideals?

Though the story was written 1,000 years ago, there are many instances where people blindly follow Western traditions and values. For examples, actors, actresses, singers, and athletes are idolized. Westerners literally follow their thoughts on social media. There is no reason behind following over-paid celebrities, yet they do.

Another controversial example would be those who are against gay-marriage under the belief of promoting traditional marriage. The traditions are becoming outdated and there is the question of whether or not to adapt to modern ideals.

6. What symbols are used throughout the text? What do these symbols represent?

- *Flesh-eating or cannibalism: corruption, oversimplification of traditions, ignorance, blind loyalty*
- *Moon: light and dark imagery (awareness and ignorance), omens and foreshadowing*
- *“Confucian Morality and Virtue:” traditional, archaic belief systems*
- *The iron-house: China, seemingly indestructible*
- *Children: an offer of hope and innocence in the future*
- *Animals: human nature*
 - *dog = loyalty; hyena/wolf = antagonistic nature of men; rabbit = innocence*

7. Discuss the concept of madness as a means of promoting change or awareness.

I find the use of madness and paranoia an interesting method to promoting change or awareness because of the irony found in the statement. One assumes that if one is mad, then one is not mentally stable, and thus cannot be aware of the environmental or social aspects of life. At the same time, it is when people begin to question their surroundings (physical, mental, emotional, and intellectual) that they begin to feel most paranoid and outside of their comfort zone. The idea of using madness as a means of awareness is contradictory, yet one can see how it can provide the most insight because the mad are not restrained by limitations (mental, emotional, or otherwise).

8. Describe why Lu Xun decided to study literature.

Lu Xun was watching a war film and saw his classmates cheering blindly at what they saw in the film. This disturbed him and he realized that although he could cure people with medicine, he would be unable to cure their hearts or spirits. He decided the way to cure peoples' spirits was through the study of humanities and literature.

9. What is the younger brother's fearful realization of his own family?

He realizes his brother is an eater of flesh (Chinese reader 69).

10. What is the elder brother's response to the morality of eating human flesh?

"That's the way it's always been..." (Chinese reader 70).

11. Why is the quote, "Everything requires careful consideration if one is to understand it," (Chinese reader 68) repeated in the text?

A reason this line is repeated on page 68 of the Chinese reader is to point out the discrepancy of understanding. The madman focuses on being able to understand why he is suspicious of everyone; however, once he achieves a level of understanding he is labeled as a madman or non-conformist. Perhaps there is an irony in this statement.

Activities:

Required Texts

"Preface to *A Call to Arms*" and "A Madman's Diary" by Lu Xun

-- Have students read "Preface to *A Call to Arms*" and "A Madman's Diary" the night before.

1) Introduction of history (10-15 minutes)

Provide students with a brief background of Lu Xun and his role as a critic against the nationalist movement. This will provide students insight into his "anti-governmental" beliefs. It will also highlight a social construct for the text.

It would help to provide students with a Confucian understanding of *filial piety*. Excerpts from Confucius' *Analects* may be used.

2) Discussion (20 minutes)

Depending on the size and make-up of the class, discussion can proceed in different ways.

- Start off with a small group discussion (groups of 3-5). Allow the students to discuss their ideas and responses to the discussion questions above for about 5 minutes, and then switch 1-2 students from one group to another. Have the groups share their ideas again

with the new members of the group. This will allow students to share various responses and perspectives without having a whole class discussion. It will also require students to pay more attention in discussion as they might be the one to switch groups.

- Whole class discussion might work better. Have students utilize a Socratic Seminar, or “Circle Talk” as Cecilia Boyce mentioned style of discussion. The students point out ideas, analysis, or comparison they found interesting within the text and then switch after 10 minutes. The teacher remains outside of the discussion while the students take the lead.

3) Transition (5 minutes)

While this story assumes a more violent approach to bringing about enlightenment of social change; introduce satire as a means of humor for social commentary. Include a brief commentary on Lu Xun’s purposes in writing in comparison with the purpose of satire.

4) Dinosaur Comic (15 minutes)

Ryan North is the creator of Dinosaur Comic. Dinosaur Comic uses the same image of three different dinosaurs, with different text each time. Dinosaur Comics utilize humor as a means of having students analyze a text. I plan to utilize the comic in order to teach students to differentiate between summarizing, paraphrasing, and direct quoting from a text.

Below is a sample of Dinosaur Comics:



Have students break into groups (2-3 students per group) and complete a blank Dinosaur Comic utilizing “A Madman’s Diary.” Students are required to utilize at least 2 direct quotes, 2 summaries, and 2 paraphrased statements from the text.

Citations:

Boyce, Cecelia. "Dinosaur Comics." Indiana University, Indiana Memorial Union, Bloomington, IN. 8 July 2014. Lecture.

North, Ryan. *Dinosaur Comics*. 2003. Web. 15 July 2014. www.quartz.com

Shen, Yu. "Modern China Mid-1900s to the Present." Indiana University. Indiana Memorial Union, Bloomington, IN. 8 July 2014. Lecture.

"The Biography of Lu Xun." *Shoaxing Lu Xun Museum*. n.p. n.d. Web. 15 July 2014.

Wagner, Marsha. "Lu Xun: China's Greatest Modern Writer." *Asia for Educators*. 2009. Web. 15 July 2014.

Xu, Gary. "Modern Chinese Literature: May-Fourth Tradition and Alternative Visions." Indiana University. Indiana Memorial Union, Bloomington, IN. 8 July 2014. Lecture.

Xun, Lu. "A Madman's Diary." *Selected Stories of Lu Hsun*. Foreign Languages Press, Peking: 1960. Web. 15 July 2014.